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*The
Southern Temper*

Judson Crews



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Waco

M O T I V E

1946

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THE SOUTHERN TEMPER—

Out of the labyrinthine ways of time the South was given birth. You can see the age of it in a giant swamp cedar in Louisiana dripping with the hoar moss. There is age in the slow rivers of the delta country where movement is a matter of time, not seconds or minutes, but of hours, days, or weeks, movement a matter of time and not a matter of motion at all. You can dream the green scum past the giant black walnut, on toward the clumped cat-tails where a dragon fly opens and closes its wings to the slow tune of a distant cicada, dream it onward beyond the small ledges of the lime rock studded with the chalky shale that once were shells of mollusks sloughing through silt—forty, fifty centuries ago.

Time is a slow matter in the deep South. It's always been that way. Look to the gathering of moss and ivy over the walls of a southern university reared in stone back in the days when our great-grandfathers were young men. Listen to the legends of the darky folk and you'll know that the modern age of speed with split-second stop watches is something out of a fantasia of the things of years to come, from a tale of Jules Verne. You can walk about Jackson square in New Orleans in the spring, pausing to caress a bright camellia or to feel the ferrous flakes of an intricately wrought iron grill and whisper with all the conviction of a saint under revelation, "Time, there isn't such a thing as time. A concept dreamed up by a mad fool who never knew what life was. A concept dreamed up by a mad fool." Down Canal Street and Royal and along Rampart you know that you came just a minute late or else you would have passed the slave market and seen a strong black buck, stripped to the

waist, standing proudly, defiantly, on the auction block, and would have heard the bids go right on past the twelve hundred dollar mark because he was young and a good stud, and you could see the muscles rippling up and down his shoulders. And on the outskirts of the group of bidders you may have seen a strong, bearded man, the beard greying, but the lusty strength of youth still in his body, the carriage, and the concern for humanity in his face. Asking, you would have found that some knew of him. A free lance newspaper man who was said to be a poet too, though no one had ever read any of his work. A fellow by the name of Whitman. Time: a concept dreamed up by a mad fool who never knew what life was.

Here the night streets of Lafcadio Hearn in anguish. Hearn writing of the Creole, the black turning to brown and turning to golden, and thinking of a golden race in the Orient. Hearn dreaming in America of Japan and China. Saying in every line he ever wrote, Time is a concept dreamed up by a mad fool who never knew what life was. Race is a creed for fools. Hearn dreaming of Japan and China, dreaming of a golden race to come.

Or there are the busy day streets, cluttered with traffic and trade, and a young man walking up and down, rhapsodizing to himself on the sins of the city, the sins of modern times, the mistake of the freedom of the Negroes with their primitive rape-fiend minds. What of the age of consent, free silver, the women's fashions, and the Bible belt's hell-for-leather persecution of the church of Rome?

Young W. C. Brann would take a hand in the matter;

he would write like a man, he would say what he pleased. He would sell it to the papers, and if the papers wouldn't buy it then he knew exactly what he could do.

He would go to Texas. He'd heard of Texas, a wild place and maybe not so wild. He would go to Texas . . . and he went. He went to the chalk scrub hills of the capital city, a frontier town; you could call it that all right. Let Joaquin Miller and Bret Harte talk of the west and lure out a young fool like Samuel Clemens. Texas was a country. William Sidney Porter knew what it was. But then Porter had to leave town suddenly, so Brann took over his paper and moved to Waco. Well, why bring it all to mind again? Brann is still in Waco, but a long time dead.

That is one of the characteristics of the South; you can pinch it anywhere—it doesn't hurt. And you would think it was dead all over. Then you suddenly find that it is not.

A kid like George Milburn found New Orleans not quite dead in the twenties. He found the garrets on Royal in the French Quarter still there. He found writers still there. He walked through the town and talked to Roark Bradford about the songs niggers sing when they just want to sing, and what was at the bottom really of hobo tunes.

Sherwood Anderson had a room in New Orleans so he could get DARK LAUGHTER off his chest. It was a rolling book. He must have spent days sitting beside the Mississippi not thinking about any kind of book. But he could see the Negroes and he saw that they weren't as black any more as it seemed to him they had been in his childhood.

What of the dream of Lafacadio Hearn? Was the golden race actually on its way? What of the defeat of Brann, the hatred still running deep in his veins?

The niggers were something for Anderson to look at, think about. "So many black men slowly growing brown. Then would come the light brown, the velvet-browns, Caucasian features. The brown women tending up to the job—getting the race lighter and lighter. Soft southern nights, warm dusky nights. Shadows flitting at the edge of cotton fields, in dusky roads by sawmill towns. Soft voices laughing, laughing."* A strange town that gits in your blood. Gits in your blood like dynamite. Will blow. Will blow.

Faulkner moved in with Anderson and they fought like hell. Maybe they both wanted to use the typewriter, maybe the cool rhythm of the river breeze caught them off guard at the same time. The magnolias. They fought like hell, but they always made up.

Don't say it was a wicked city, don't say that it was a carnival city of the world. Don't say that it was the blacks turning golden here. Don't say that it was the fact that Whitman once stood on this same street corner and looked after a creole broad and went home singing rhapsodies of the body magnetic. It's not that simple.

Beale Street in Memphis means as much in any man's language as Rampart in New Orleans. Beale Street Blues. The nigger getting bluer than blue—getting the blues into his blood. The blue grass. Nashville, a Fugitive city. The blue goes into the blood. The bluest blood the South ever knew sooner or later went

* Sherwood Anderson, DARK LAUGHTER, p. 73.

into the veins of golden children. A golden girl can have silver laughter and blue blood in her veins.

Nashville the Fugitive city. The Fugitives not in favor of blue blood, not in favor of golden girls. Nor in favor of the corporate farm. They stood for red blood. Red blood slopping over the earth when a Negro gets out of his place? Red blood on black thighs to save the virtue of white thighs? Red blood they stood for. But at last they could not stand.

An interesting thing about the South—beyond the slowness they all talk of—it affects a person like he wants to be. A white man goes to Louisville it's a white man's town. A yella gal go to Looieville, it's a yella gal's town. Charleston; black bottom, red bottom, blue bottom, and every bottom's got wings:

No bottom like a delta bottom where the niggers laugh and sing and lie in the sun, where the river flows like slow oil flowing through a slow land. The river rises, soft, flowing; flowing like black gold over the lands. Rising, inching it up, like a dark-brown turning golden-brown.

. If you walk halfway to a wall, Boy: and I say stop. Then you walk halfway to the wall, Boy, and I say stop. Just keep that up, Boy, and I say stop. And then you walk halfway to the wall, Boy, and I say stop. O. K., just keep that up, Boy, and how long before you gonna reach that wall, Boy? Why—I'd just natchely reach out and tetch it with my hand, Boss, just tetch it with my hand. That's the way black niggers are brown niggers, then golden niggers. They just naturally reach out and touch it, Boss. How long before the blue blood will flow in the golden veins?

Just natchely reach out and touch it, Boss. Touch the black bottom in Charleston and the blue bottom in Alabama. Just natchely reach out and touch it, Boss.

And rip it wide open—rip the black delta. Turn the soil up to the fresh air. Loosen it and break it asunder. The black delta hugging a lapping, lolling Mississippi. Rip the hills apart, long rows rising and falling, climbing then breaking away. In May the corn will be knee high, waving gently West, break the prairie of Oklahoma and North Texas, mile after mile, the tractors, six abreast each marked by a spume of dust rising like a licking flame.

Start with the red tight clay of Georgia, rip it open. Gash the steppes. Open up the pale loose yellow land of the hill country. Dip to the black delta and break it up. Through the white sand of East Texas, on to the red sands of the west. Open up a furrow that a man like God could walk in, that a horse like a myth could drop his droppings in. Open up the land. And it is so.

And the rains come. And the wealth of the land is drunk into the belly of the Gulf.

Stir the land, open it up. The red clay, the yellow earth, the black bottom, the white sand and the red sand. And the wind lifts the wealth of the land to the sky, to the sun.

Break the land; a long furrow one thousand miles and the rains come and the winds come and the sun beats down and desolation stalks the land, like Sherman in his march through Georgia.

The people are hungry and the people are restless and they swarm to the mill town for enough for rent and enough for bread and enough for a gladrag or two and

a gallon of gas on Saturday night. Blame them? The spindles hum and buzz in the dry air like an acre of hornets, the lint hangs heavy, the threads break, the operators, darting, bending, tying; darting, bending, tying; darting, bending, tying; darting, bending, tying; darting bending, tying; darting, bending, tying; darting, bending, tying; dartingbendingtyeing; dartingbendingtyeing; dartbendtie;dartbendtie. The mind reeling, the body. Then home, then bed. Three shifts going. One working, one sleeping, one seeing to the coming generation.

Is this the temper of the South? What of the soldiers in the tent villages up and down the land, tent cities. Overnight passes and week-ends. The street corners, looking at the girls, a little tipsy, the Palm Hotel, a shack-rat. Whoring, fighting, and puking. What of the land, and what of the mills?

What of little Chicago plump down on the Texas plains, what of little Pittsburgh roaring away beneath its own grime in Alabama? What of little Sodom and Gomorrah, where the cities are all played out and a rambling dancehall stands in a hollow a little way off the road?

Is this the South, is it half the South? Is passing in front of a cafe eating a good meal? This is not the South, but it is a little of the odor of it. Actually it is vast, vast as the heavens and the stars, and vast as the sea and filled with all strange creatures. Do I know the South, does anyone? But we have seen these glimpses: I have caught a facet that would almost blind me, and again there was a jagged flash that cut the heart like flying shrapnel.

I have seen people and places and things, and some-

times my soul has almost cried out to be struck blind, before I see again, but then the prayer changes on my lips; there are so many, so many already blind. Maybe I can take their hand and help to lead the way. Maybe this is the testament most in need of being made. Thus I picture fragments of the South, neither for beauty, nor yet for horror; that at last, at last, the people might know. Can knowledge of this forever, forever go unheeded?

THESE ARE A FEW OF THE PEOPLE—

There was a kid I met that was sixteen. He'd been three years on the road. (Yeh, he had a home, he said, if you wanted to make him laugh.)

He had ridden the rods through fourteen states. And he had seen men who weren't men anymore. He had seen the land that was wasting away, that would take the wind on Friday and hover over Texas on Sunday, and God knew where it went from there on. He had seen a kid with croup cough blood out of his lungs that showed the grime of three factories and a coal mine.

He had seen girls who had sold their virtue for a fifteen cent meal. And they were rotting away with syphilis now and they would pray that they would die before it came meal time again.

He saw a pillar of society break a kid's head with a silver cane because the kid was hungry enough to steal out of a garbage can that had been sprinkled with kerosene.

So he sought darkness when he would scavenge. He would skirt the sewer and mount the compost heap (where the odor rose warm and thick) and he would

stagger down the other side clutching at the place where his stomach used to be, but where now there festered an ulcer, even as there was in 'his heart.

He would lean against a cottonwood that was gaunt against the sky and a slime would creep over him and three ravens would soar over him and these lines went through his mind—"Buzzard, buzzard, flashing black in this jungle of woeful lack, what immoral greed and lie decrees that I should not die?"

The sky drifted over him in a slow monotony, passing vulture, vulture passing peak, passing pine. The slow sky drifting in a monotony of soul-excruciating pain.

The boy would lick out his tongue and dampen the grime that had settled on his cracked lips and the thought ran in his mind: The sky's moving slow today, it's moving like a nation that's got culture pulsing deep in its veins, like a nation that's got a past that glory ain't no name for, a nation that's got a past but ain't got charity (our preacher always said, Read love), got a past but ain't gonna have no future. He didn't say it. His lips quivered and he looked at the buzzard and said: "Brother!—except that God gave you wings—"

When the stars were dim and the moon had gone out he sought companionship of youth, he moved with a gnawing compulsion, wondering: would love ever be his to know? Would love ever be his to feel? So at dawn he joined a picket line and he whispered "Comrade!" to a working girl with hollow eyes and hollow breasts.

And the cops came swinging their clubs and shooting vomiting gas and some lead. The kid went down on one

knee retching up blood and bile but no food. The girl got a cop's boot to the pelvis. She screamed, went double, and lay still.

From the jail window was a long street and the pale pink west from the dying sun silhouetted a shaggy skyline and three ravelled clouds.

At midnight vapor was thick over the city. It was grey, tinted pink and blue with neon and at three o'clock it faded all away, into the penetrating darkness. A prostitute in the cell next to him began sobbing again, and a Negro from another corridor called out, "Gotta smoke, mister? For God's sake anybody got a smoke?"

The jail beans and the two slices of thin balogna lasted him for two days and for three hundred and seventy-six weary freight train miles.

At evening he lay on his back watching the mass of sky that seemed so purposeless. He rolled over on his stomach feeling its emptiness and he saw the waters of the sewage canal. They were less turbulent than the sky but even darker, and he saw the waters without purpose or direction.

He rolled over again. And then he saw the ravens.

"... what immoral greed and lie

decrees that I shall not die. . . "

(The river will find purpose in closing over my head, purpose in filling my tired lungs.) And he saw the buzzards wheeling overhead. Is it too much to think (he was only sixteen, three years on the road) that he might have said: "Maybe God will give me wings, maybe wings. . . "

He is dead.

Do you understand? Three more years, a little food,

some clothes, and he could have been a valiant fighter in this day. Look, he could have cursed and bled in Bataan and be at rest now with the hero dead. Instead of that ignominious, turgid river. The hero dead.

Is this the South?

He was just a small tyke, though almost three years old. They kept him in an old number three wash tub that was padded with a ragged patch-work quilt.

He reared himself up slightly, grasping the edges of the tub with thin wrinkled hands, when I squatted on my haunches beside his crib. He opened his eyes wide in an effort to see, though somehow his eyes seemed not to focus anywhere. He didn't murmur or fret. I wondered what would have been his thoughts if he could articulate to himself the facts: If I had a little milk my eyelids wouldn't be always weighing down so heavily. If I had a little milk my legs soon would be strong enough to support my body. One cow can give a lot of milk. One cow doesn't cost very much money. The government killed cows in herds for days and days.

I wonder what would be his thoughts.

Would this be a young Diogenes?

Would the American press flash forth the headlines: DANGEROUS RADICAL LIVING ON A FARM IN THE HOOKWORM SANDY SOIL OF GEORGIA?

Is this the South?

There was a girl I met in Arkansas, the secretary-treasurer of Commonwealth College, and she was an ardent little disciple of a man named Marx. There is quite a bit I could say about her, how her lips were child-like and her chin was hard, how her eyes really didn't have

hate in them, how her hair flowed backward from her ears, how proud she was to have been ten years in the labor movement but not yet twenty-five years old. But I will let her speak for herself

"You all want to watch that your poetry isn't poetry for poetry's sake. Any art, to live and to be strong and 'beautiful', must reflect the most dynamic forces in society at any given time. This is 1937 and life is moving fast. And life is dramatic. This is one of the most interesting periods in history. But it is most interesting to those who are in the stride. There are always escapists, and in the arts the escapists will stand off and 'observe' from the sidelines, if they see at all, and their art will be 'lovely' to the non-artist escapists, and will be read in high-pitched and affected tones at bridge clubs and literary teas, but this art is not 'beautiful' to the people who are genuine and living life fully and taking part in the movement to make life less sordid for the whole world. In other words, art must have content. . .

"We have a mural in our dining hall by Joe Jones. It's a vigorous thing. It's hungry Negro sharecroppers in a pig pen of a 'home', it's dust storms and floods and emaciated cows, it's lynchings, it's hysterical men and women setting fire to human bodies, it's ugly coal mines and calloused hands and sweaty faces. You might say it's not beautiful and why do we want this thing in our dining room where we have to sit and look at it day in and day out. Well, we want to look at it. We don't want to escape from the realities of life. We want it there. We know it exists. We want to be reminded every minute that it exists. We want the picture of it

before us every minute that we may be stimulated to fight the harder against it. It stimulates our sense of the fine by making us want to do away with the ugly sordid."

Is this the South?

Or there is the letter from home, to a redheaded country girl from East Texas who got in a love affair that became finally so embarrassing to her folks that by the seventh month she was sent on a vacation to her married sister who lived in a distant town.

Her mother writes:

"You know how V—— W—— laughed and misbehaved during the meeting last summer, dont guess she feels so good now J—— G—— shot her through the face Friday nite her old man and J—— had a fite Fri. eve she picked up the shot gun went to his house shot at him first and he shot to sear her she shot at him again and thin he shot at her Bullet glanced her jaw bone he wouldn't let know body pick her up until the law got theare they Caried her to the Sanitarium dont think she will die".

Is this the South?

Two tattered men in central Texas squat before a small shielded fire in a half-dry ravine.

One pokes the fire, and a draft of wind carries the smoke billowing into his face. He coughs, catches his balance with his hand.

The other watches him without moving.

The first places a smoke-blackened can over the low fire. The can tilts to one side. He re-sets it. It tilts to the other side but doesn't turn over. He leaves it.

The other rises, taking another blackened can, small-

er, with him. He walks down to the slow, narrow water that is green at the edge where it does not move, but clear toward the center.

The man pulls his penis out and stands pissing, looking unpreoccupied up and down the shallow ravine.

He scoops up a bucket of water and walks back to the man at the fire.

Is this the South?

When I stepped up on the porch she got up out of his lap quick. She wasn't very big. She had a flat torso; good legs, medium breasts and in the face she was really as ugly as the devil—but it was an ugliness that you would sort of like. I went ahead asking her the questions on the questionnaire.

In a minute her older sister came in from the grocer's. She wasn't any taller but she was heavier, more woman; her hair was a faded blond and her face was fairly pretty, but there was something in it you wouldn't like at all.

She started batting her sister around, called her a silly little fool, told her to turn down the radio. She started answering the rest of the questions.

Her husband kept on sitting there in the same chair where he was all the time. He was a fairly nice looking young fellow. But he looked tired.

Is this the South?

The other day, in a restless mood, I was walking up and down, striding through one dreary dusty street after another. I had been walking for hours, hardly observing where I was going, only making a point of keeping to the back streets. Almost exhausted, I paused once, sitting on the curbing of a culvert. It was in a

dilapidated neighborhood. The houses small, rundown. It was a kind of gnomish fairy land; I walked slowly, almost in wonder.

And suddenly before me I saw a great physician, on a sagging porch—an old woman in soleless house slippers stood showing two bewhiskered shrivelled old men with bleary eyes a great four-bit bottle of patented medicine. Her jaws moved with the explanation of it, but I could not hear her words.

Is this the South?

Faint swans, fragile fringe over fetid flesh. Little girl of the cherry bloom fruit lanes, little girl of scalding heart tears over not then flabby breasts. Little girl.

Now faint glimpses through fluttering fringe of a doubtful slow delight of cherry-tipped twin hillocks in cream-rose velvet.

Naked bodies, now you see 'em now you don't. A shadow or patch of darkness where ecstasy dwells or dances forth to entice, or does it?

Smarting feet, perspiring torso, longing for eternal love but drawing blanks—fetid flesh—wisps of urgent scents, lavender, cool as a cucumber.

Back stage, last performance over. The night's work half done—almost half done. Gotta buy baby new shoes. How you gonna do it? How?

Is this the South?

There was one youth that heard of the conscription and in the back of his mind was this vision of alternatives: Symbol of a wired chair, a copper head band smelling of scorched flesh! or: Of steel-jacketed bullets piercing kidneys, piercing lungs. And he said in his heart: "This is my crime against society; that I am

young—that I am an idealist.”

He furrowed his brow and cleared his throat and he spoke: “I’ll not be conscripted—I’d rather die for an ideal than for a nation. Maybe it’s treason to say so, but an ideal is greater than any nation. Me: I’d rather die for an ideal.”

Is this the South?

She said, “How about it?” and I answered: “How about it?”

She looked a question at me, but as I ordered two beers she sat down. We were the only ones there. I pulled out a long wallet and dumped out two nickels, a dime, and a Canadian penny. That was everything. I dropped the penny back and pushed the other across the counter.

She had started getting up: “You too goddam generous,” she said, and walked out in the cold night looking haughty-righteous as if I had tried to rape her.

Is this the South?

I stood on a viaduct looking at the railway yards beneath and the stretch of wasted lots beyond.

A hundred feet away a boy stopped at a power pole. He struck a match against the pole and it was snuffed out in the wind. He flipped it away. He tried another, cupped his hands about it, and lighted his cigarette.

A girl approached him in a loose dress without much under it. Young—jail bait. Her hair fell straight to her shoulders and the wind blew it back from her face.

She reached into the boy’s pocket for a cigarette and lighted it from his.

They walked towards a dry gulley, half-skirted with greening sumac.

He reached down for her skirts before they were quite out of sight.

Is this the South?

In 1922 Mrs. Harper had her hair bobbed and walked Commerce without hose on. She said she was putting the past aside even as she had her second husband because it was a dead thing and she would not have it stinking up her young life.

In 1931 she had long since gotten rid of her short skirts and her hair was just long enough to draw straight and dark to a small knot at the nape of her neck. Her third husband left her at her own request when a young college girl died of an abortion he had financed (she'd not risk going to bed with the careless wretch). And now she wintered in Capri and read the novels of Wyndham Lewis and Jean Cocteau and flaunted a quote about the past being a bucket of ashes.

In 1937 came the menopause.

She looked at three wedding bands and something compelled her to ask herself what she had done to make the present a generation to be known after she was dead. She bought a pair of pince-nez and black silk pajamas and immediately began laboring on a critical work treating the aesthetics of Greek mythology.

"The past is the midwife of tomorrow," she said.

Is this the South?

There was a yard full of kids. The oldest one was about four. He seemed well fed but in need of washing. His overalls hung on him like a rag and they were open from the neck to the crotch. He had a pot-bellied little body, as all of the kids did, and his navel stuck out longer than his penis.

Is this the South?

She had the excessive bud of sweet young girlhood. She smiled the smile. She suffered the loosening of bodice. And then her eyes went round and her mouth formed the plastic O that trebled a silence into the silence when her heart was robbed of its will to protest. The ultimate end approached its inevitable conclusion.

She wished—she didn't know what she wished.

She had played herself for a fool.

She was afraid.

Only her heart pounding: no longer the bud, no longer the bud.

Is this the South?

An old man was sitting, whittling, in the sun. I walked up and started talking to him. He squinted up at me and he rolled a quid of tobacco about and he started talking, "We got a great sore inside us. It's a white and festerin' thing. It's the thing that's got first to be healed. It's not a controversy of black or whites, nor of tariff or free trade, nor of central power or state's rights—not these. It's deeper than that and it's nastier than that. It's a pherloserphy that says: It's your neck or mine, Brother, and I'll be damned if it's gonna be mine."

Is this the South?

These are people I've seen. I've seen them up and down the land. I've seen them in railway yards, at the university, at cheap carnivals that got run out of town their second day. I've seen them sitting on a bench on a court-house lawn in a small town. Some of them are hard as brass and they know the ropes, some of them are beaten, though not even they could tell you why.

Some were hungry and some were shivering in the rain.

Are these the South? No, they are not the South; just a little of its odor though clings to them. There are thousands of others, not any of them like these, but all of them with something of the odor of the South clinging to them. Thousands of others all different, some of them better and some worse. And there is a vast horde I've never seen. There are all those I missed by not being in downtown Durham this afternoon, but they too would have the odor of the South clinging to them, just as those in Clarendon and Tyson and Alma and Tallyhoot, not to mention Durant and Beaumont and Gulfport.

Yes, these are so few, but they are a part, their little part, and the odor clings to them.

There are others I wanted to mention and could not, and those I could have mentioned and didn't.

There is, for instance, a blond boy that married rich and inherited land. He walked up and down, restless. And he had been so calm, happy—free and easy—before. He walked like a lion in a cage. He kept trying to express his feeling and he couldn't get it across. He wasn't much of a talker. He kept starting, "It's sort of like—well, sort of—sort of like being—tied you might say. That's not it. It's like—hell, you just feel—"

You could have squeezed anguish out of him like sorghum out of blue ribbon cane.

"It's like—" he started all over again. Then suddenly, he stopped dead. "By God, I'll tell you what it's like. It's like having your nuts cut out. That's what it's like, like being castrated."

Or there is another, who swallowed everything at

college that was ever handed across the speaker's rostrum. And when he got his diploma he knew for damn sure that he was educated and never bought a book again in his life, though he later had three limousines and a motor boat that made Pontchartrain seem like a bathtub that boat would travel so fast.

Or there is the old codger that was a sort of spiritual heir to a cross between Thomas Paine and Johnny Appleseed. He had a cart and a little tent and a hand press, and some ideas like are not used in the daily news. He went up and down the country printing handbills that showed forth some of the handwriting that's been on the wall, ignored, for a mighty long time now.

Or the New Orleans police detective who said if they took the rubber hose away from him why they would never have a criminal to confess and in six months you'd be unable to hire a freight handler for less than two-ten a day. Niggers and workin' stiffs you got to keep in their place.

These men are not the South maybe, but they've got the odor of it, and they are making it what it is and what it's gonna be for a long time to come.

No, they're not the South maybe. But this you can be sure of; it will never be unmade, remade, without taking these men into consideration, these men and their thousands of brothers, these men and these women and all of these little children. It's only with these that we can ever get out of the past.

These were the war years, and the depression years, and in a way they brought us a long way out of the past.

The salt was caking the seams of our tattered garments, and the spittle on our lips was cotton—but the

distance folded upon itself.

Eleven years was a long time, to have been hungry almost all the time. A star fell to the sewage canal, beyond the flatness of the ramshackle warehouses—empty.

We had come a long way empty.

We had seen stars but only for a moment. Mostly dawns which were dirty smears, accompanied by a thousand odors of decaying.

We have come a long way out of the past, but are still the past. What of tomorrow—next year?

THESE ARE SOME OF THE PLACES—

Unworld upon unworld like lovers; a propagation without creation, spawning bastard existence into a wilderness of only slightly un-damnation.

It is a day, a day, my everlasting unsurprise, who, never having awaked to dawn, weeps eternally for the sunset skies.

Is this the South?

You get what you ask for. That is the thing to be remembered when the belly knots and groans and the bones ache and muscles cramp as the damp of the river-bank saturates your half-slumber, beneath the roaring high bridge of the thousand-thousand metropolis where the bright streets are golden and the people are golden—if you ask the right asks and keep the mind sweet and don't stray to the byways not intended—

You get what you ask for.

There is testimony of a hundred saints immobile and pious, the carved marble: Thanks, Thanks, Thanks, piled at their plaster feet; there is testimony of a hundred candles.

YE RECEIVE NOT BECAUSE YE ASK NOT.

That is the thing to be remembered when the belly knots and groans . . . when the golden people become too golden, when the rot of the city penetrates the river musk that is sweet, sweet beside the bilious breath of golden monsters ruling the golden city. It is a thing to be remembered.

Ask! Ask, oh submerged America. Ask with a voice like thunder, with a tongue like fire.

Ask and it shall be given.

Is this the South?

By 3:20 the trams began and the neon had shattered its last brightness on the broad street that lay prey only a moment before to the ghosts of three hundred years.

Slumber darted back and forth across my mind like a strip-teaser making her thirteen curtain calls—the applause was the whir and roar of a wild city barging forth to impress a weary world.

Already a sliver of silver edged with slightest pink fought to permeate the sky—later ribbons wreathed the horizon—last was the sun beyond the wharfs, the levies, the river, and the river boats.

From the hotel window I could see two cemeteries, all still, and five churches, all quiet; and the roar of the city was louder, the street cars were thicker, faster, as

Is this the South?

the new day choked itself with its own hands.

Rustling of wind in dry corn in a scorched valley between scorched hills: it's as lonely a sound as coyotes howling at a low-hung moon.

Is this the South?

In Houston's mist of midnight harbor, hovering,

shrouding the faint lost cry of a klaxon that would but pause and never silence, I saw in the pockets of the night gaunt men seeking light and warmth and food I knew they would never find.

There was a clammy cramp that seeped upward meeting the million beads of mist on hair of face or arms. The men tramping, tramping.

There is talk about the future when the past will be no more. But these men will never see that dawn.

And now is now.

Is this the South?

Flint-like the terrapin hills rise and fall across the dull horizon. Flint-like beneath the broken reeling sky shot through with strong brittle beams, the arrow sun, hitting, wavering, piercing, sinking to the heart of the terrapin hills. Beneath the broken reeling sky the sun like hot lead, the sun like molten platinum, the sun weighing like the weight of death upon the land, the hills. Death slowly beneath the dull sky, death between the burnt-out blue horizons, death in the length and breadth, death to the heart of the terrapin hills.

Is this the South?

There are "Old Plantations" up and down the South. They aren't plantations at all. They are drinking places and dancing places. Generally they are great rambling shacks, just a little better than third rate barns. They have three, four piece orchestras, with either just kids, or else Army rejects.

The places are filled with youngsters, 14, 15, 16, and with soldiers and hard-boiled middle-agers; smoke hangs thick and heavy, in an odor of stale beer; sound, heavy and hybrid.

At 11 o'clock the juveniles have to clear out, at 12 o'clock is the soldier's curfew.

Before that hour the dancing is close, and fast and hot. Before that hour a few are tipsy, some dead drunk. Before that hour couples go out occasionally—to a parked car, or to shrub hedges, or to an abandoned outhouse; to whatever is handy.

Is this the South?

Are these the places that have impressed me? Are these the places, I say, are they the South? Are these the good, the bad?

I could speak of El Paso, where I sat in a little cafe in a nervous fever and asked for milk. They poured some thick cream from a can into a glass and put in some water and stirred it and brought it to me, and I cried out, "Milk, I said milk!" And they said, "Seven cents, please." And I paid them and went out in the street retching but not vomiting because there was nothing in my system.

I could have mentioned the cool mountains in South Texas where a rain will come on you as sudden as a whirlwind in the Panhandle summer. I could speak of San Solomon Springs not twenty miles away where water flows out of the ground at the rate of 21,000,000 gallons a day.

I could speak of the places I saw in Mississippi a year after the big flood and how there were water marks halfway to the roofs on the paintless black houses and there were people who said that the farmers would never come back to them, but they did.

There was the oil gusher in Mexia, the wildcatter on fire in Borger or the cut-over swamps in Louisiana.

There were the great colonial white mansions in Georgia, shaded with great oaks like dreams, and beyond them the group of laborer's shacks, six, eight, in a row, black in the rotting sun. What of a trinket shop in Brownsville, with silver and turquoise hair, bracelets and hat bands and leather sandals, small derringers, a stuffed alligator, and the risque post cards to send to the folks back home. What of the Winter Garden in Memphis where the paw-paw is red in the deep of December, and the loquat is without knowledge of seasons. These too are places and part of the South.

What of the morgue in a progressive southern town where they've had a man on ice for eight years? It's a place too.

What of the whore house hotel in Dallas where people walked through my room all night long and I woke once and saw through a window, like an apparition, a great white stone cross standing high against the sky? What of the boat ride on the Gulf out from Corpus Christi and the Diesels purring in the bowels of the boat like the heart in the body of a kitten?

Vicksburg is a symbol, and what of an agate lamp in Waco, over a tomb without a name?

I haven't mentioned the dirt streets and the run-down houses of the little towns. I haven't mentioned the small iron bridges of the by-roads that quiver and reel with any load. I haven't mentioned the sinks, the swamps, the salt beds, or the limestone creeks where I've heard the cows lowing for water that isn't there. And has Thomas Wolfe ever told you of the plague of the locusts?

This is just a small fleeting glimpse of the places of

the South, not the good nor the bad.

What of the things I have seen?

One was a symbol that leapt into my vision from a newspaper in Milwaukee, and it's something I've never erased from my mind.

There was a dark barren field and a dark night sky. Floating in the center of the sky was a great white star with lettering saying: TEXAS. There were two ropes anchored about the upper left point of the star, and the ends of the ropes dropped taut and plumb. At the end of each was a man; they dangled back to back, motionless, in the dark night sky: Black men!

Is this the South?

In the reference room of a public library in a small central Texas city I once saw a set of twenty volumes, most beautifully printed and bound. These books were devoted to the South's contribution towards the making of a nation. I looked at the set of books, and I thought: I am a great believer in the wide and involved sequence of cause and effect.

I said in my mind: If all of the stuff about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was on the level, if the War between the States and the period of reconstruction had been prompted by such a magnanimous spirit as we hear tell about in northern history books, then this set on the South's contribution to the development of the nation would be a hundred volumes rather than the twenty which it is today.

These two things I have seen standing like symbols. Are they the South?

These people, places, things, are varied and scattered and without much system. In that respect they are like

the South. They are full of contradictions. They are like the South in that respect too. They are the rich pitted against the poor. There are the blacks pitted against the whites, the whites are, at any rate. There are the agrarians set stubbornly in a lost battle against the industrialists, and the hard-shell Baptist in a lost fight against the practitioners of modernism. There is labor bowing its neck doggedly and dully, but too often giving ground against the capitalist, the buyer, the money man.

There is the Alabama dirt-farmer going in debt for fertilizer and there is the wealth of the land going down the river to the sea. There are the old boys holding out against youth, and mothers bucking their daughters just for the sake of stubborn will. There are the small independent farms going down under the auction hammer for taxes, and there are the train-loads of sulphur going north scot free.

The South is full of contradictions, and these have got to be healed.

A doctor can't cut out a cancer and give a man health. No more can a city bury its delinquents in a state reform school and come out on top: there is a sore that's got to be healed first.

You can't cure rabies by shooting mad dogs.

And you can't cure the slave psychology of a race by hunting down that race and splintering its bones with buckshot.

What it takes, all of these things, is a lot of thinking, not all by a handful of men; a lot of dreaming, solid dreams by the mass as a whole; and lots of time and lots of work, and a certain amount of love.

We need great lovers in the South, and we've got a few.

There is another symbol. David L. Cohn, writing about Natchez, used the title, "Natchez Was A Lady." The implication, of course, being that she is not any more. But she fell for money and not for love. In that respect she is a symbol of the South. And she's haughty still. But she fell for money and not for love.

These are broken symbols of the South, its temper, something of the temper of the people.

Waco, Texas, August, 1944.







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